

House Testimony – Charter Schools and Special Education

I've worked in Michigan public schools for the last thirty years. For the first twenty years, I worked as a special education program developer and consultant at the ISD level, and as a director of special education and elementary school principal at the local district level.

In 1995 I left the traditional system because I was tired of watching large numbers of students fail, and then be put in special education where their academic skills seldom improved. I moved to the charter school side of education with hopes of creating schools where we focused on correcting learning failure, or even better – preventing learning failure.

In 2002 the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education reported these findings:

IDEA (the federal Special Education Law) is generally providing basic legal safeguards and access for children with disabilities.

However, the current system often places process above results, and bureaucratic compliance above student achievement, excellence and outcomes.

The system is driven by complex regulations, excessive paperwork and ever-increasing administrative demands at all levels.....

Too often, simply qualifying for special education becomes an end-point—not a gateway to more **effective instruction** and strong intervention.

The Commission made these recommendations:

Focus on results—not on process.

Embrace a model of prevention - not a model of failure.

Consider children with disabilities as general education children first.

<http://www.ed.gov/inits/commissionsboards/whspecialeducation/reports/index.html>

These findings and recommendations are exactly the approach you will find to special education in Michigan's public charter schools.

We are interested in creating programs that work for children, and we are focused on the correction and prevention of learning failure, not on the process of labeling students and separating them from their general education peers.

The special education identification rate is similar in charter schools but lower than in traditional schools.

Often parents come to charter schools because their home school is about to identify their child for special education. They come to us and ask "Please, don't label my child. Please, keep him in the regular class. And please, teach him to read."

At Michigan public charter schools that is what we do. At one of the schools I work with we are using a program based on brain research called neuro-reading. We are teaching students to read who have failed for years. Students typically gain 1 to 3 years in 60, 40 minute sessions. That is a huge gain for 1/3 of a school year. Many students have recovered to grade level and others been removed from special education because they are no longer disabled. Through MAPSA conferences and dissemination grants we are spreading this method to other schools.

Many special education students are not disabled; their teachers have simply failed to teach them to read.

What do we do differently in charter schools ??

Many things!

Innovative programs, orderliness of uniforms, student centered classrooms, smaller class sizes. We try new and different methods and structures – it's the mission you have given us!

Two things are very important. First we believe all our children can learn, and second, we believe that we are accountable to teach our students.

Those things seem so simple but they are so powerful.

Believing that children can learn is not the same as demanding high test scores. Believing is something our teachers do in their minds and their hearts. Without that belief the teacher can't teach and the child won't learn. A superintendent in the county where I live said this fall that 15% of his students were not capable of taking high stakes tests and should therefore be excluded from the MEAP. What was he telling his teachers, his parents, his students – "I don't expect you to learn." Research has shown us repeatedly that what we expect is what we get – and in charter schools we have high expectations for learning.

One of the reasons we must have that belief is that we are accountable. We believe it is our job to teach students to read. We know that is what our parents want. And we know that our parents have to choose us every day when they put their child in the car and drive them to our door. That is real accountability and real parent involvement.

We follow the rules and are checked on regularly. One of my schools is audited every year for special education. The CMU CSO visits multiple times a year to audit the letter of the law in ways no other public school is monitored. There are hundreds of state and federal special education rules, over 800 at last count, and we follow them all. Inside our movement we help charter schools learn these rules and set up systems to follow them. MAPSA has a technical support program and we visit our schools that ask for help. The legislative over-sight is present in charter schools, like it is in no other public school. I know – I've worked in public schools – at two different ISDs, in a large traditional local school district, providing regular and special education programs. And I now work in public charter schools. Bureaucratic and rule accountability is always present in public charter schools.

But the accountability that drives us is satisfying our parents and making sure our students can read.

The first charter school I started is now in its ninth year. It has 500 students K-8. A little less than 10% of the students there have special education IEPs. We have students with Learning Disabilities, and emotional struggles and autism and cerebral palsy. We have students who came to us identified for special education who are now learning just fine. In addition to the identified kids, we track individually the progress of about 150 students. We test every student as they enter our school and if they are suffering learning failure or are at risk of learning failure, we create individual plans to get them back on the right track.

When I describe our school many people think it is a special education school. But it is not! 80 of the students at the school have IQs over 130, putting them in the academically gifted range. Giftedness is another special need we in charter schools recognize and serve. The parents of these children bring them to our school because they know a school that believes in kids, makes room for individual difference and works closely with parents, is the best place for any child to learn.

When you walk in our classrooms you won't see the differences in kids – you'll see the difference in belief and approach. You'll see a safe place for children to grow and learn.

You'll see a place that focuses on outcomes not process.


You'll see a place that embraces a model of prevention not failure.

You'll see all children treated as general education students.

And that's what you'll see in public charter schools all across Michigan.

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President

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CS Partners serves three public charter schools:

Charyl Stockwell Academy – www.csaschool.com

Livingston Technical Academy – www.livingstontech.com

Conner Creek Academy - East